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PENKOVSKY'S PROGRESS

OLEG PENKOVSKY: *The Penkovsky Papers*. Introduction and Commentary by Frank Gibney. Translated by P. Deriabin. 349pp. Collins. 36s.

Not so long ago "Banned in Boston", used to be one of the most valuable puffs a book could earn. "Protested against in Downing Street" is less promising in one respect, but Messrs. Collins must be profoundly grateful for the publicity which the Soviet Government have given to a book which, by reason of a rather scrappy composition and alien subject, might otherwise not have received the attention it richly deserves. But for this opportune diplomatic intervention many people might have remained under the impression, which was pretty general at the time of the trial in May, 1963, that Penkovsky was a mere accessory to the case against the British businessman, Greville Wynne, framed to justify the latter's kidnapping in Hungary. This book reveals the real seriousness of the affair. The trial and conviction of Penkovsky was to the Soviet Establishment as damaging a blow as was the Hiss case to America. The repercussions were of seismic intensity. Marshals were demoted, attachés recalled, intelligence officers reallocated. Even now, two and a half years later, the memories still smart.

It is precisely because Penkovsky was so highly placed that these papers are of such interest. He had a brilliant war career, ending as a Lt.-Colonel at the age of twenty-six with five decorations and six medals, became a Colonel at thirty-one and attended three of the highest military schools. He spent ten years in the G.R.U., the Chief Intelligence Directorate of the Soviet Army. He was related to several very high-ranking officers in the Army. His revelations about the Soviet ruling elite form indeed the real theme of the book since the reader may as well be warned that, although there are some interesting insights into the technique of espionage, there is no sensational information to be found in it. From a material point of view Penkovsky was thoroughly well off and to all appearances an efficient and convinced member of the ruling class when he voluntarily got in touch with British Intelligence and during a short run of sixteen months handed over to them more than 5,000 items of information of political, military and economic matters (the figures come from the indictment at his trial). The British Service, incidentally, gets a fine testimony from General Gorny, the Chief Military Prosecutor, who describes it as an old fox "which has been in existence for around 360 years and continues to use more and more deceptive and refined methods"; but Penkovsky was a windfall. What were his motives?

At the trial he was made out to be a dissolute playboy. The usual anti-semitic overtones were also brought in. The importance of his position was minimized, though scarcely consistently with the details of the indictment, and this is still the official line. From the communist point of view it is difficult to see why this should be found necessary: after all nothing in the history of treachery can equal the record of the Russian ruling class since the Revolution, if the official version is to be believed. Why should it be surprising that a colonel should be in touch for sixteen months with British Intelligence when the faithful are still required to believe that Beria, a Marshal of the Soviet Union, was a paid employee of the same service for thirty-six years, from 1917 to 1953? Perhaps it is the difference between truth and official truth that calls for concealment on the government's part; and his realization of the same difference clearly inspired Penkovsky to make sure the reasons for his action were recorded.

His first motive was revulsion against the organization of Soviet society. The disillusioned aristocrat is a well-known phenomenon in all regimes based on privilege. Penkovsky thought it shocking that while he was being entertained by his friend Marshal Varentsov at a table collapsing with food, "salmon, fish in aspic, sprats, cheese, ten different kinds of sausage, over fifty bottles of vodka and cognac, champagne, cakes, pastry, ice-cream and so on", people in Voronezh were queueing for horse-meat. He was scandalized by the behaviour of some of his fellow aristocrats, their dissolute private lives, their immunity from the law. His second motive was fear of nuclear war. He evidently hated and distrusted Khrushchev—there may have been something personal in this—and seriously believed that he was an adventurer. After the removal of Zhukov, for whom many Russian officers had a high respect, it appeared to Penkovsky that Khrushchev was surrounded only by military yes-men. He reproduces extracts from theoretical military studies which show a dangerous indifference to the possibility of world destruction. In one case they throw an amusing light on the application of Marxist thought to war: in one and the same article General Goryainov argues that capitalist countries favour a build-up because they are afraid that arming the masses and conducting long wars would lead to revolution and on the next page that capitalists favour long wars because they lead to greater profits. It may well be, as Mr. Edward Crankshaw says in a sympathetic and entertaining foreword, that Penkovsky confused contingency planning with purposeful strategy, but he was close to the source of danger, and he believed it real.

The book is made up partly of documents attributed to Penkovsky himself and partly of a connecting narrative. American editing and adaptation have been responsible for attracting some attacks on the authenticity of the former, unjustified except possibly in matters of detail; certain verbal infelicities may be attributable to the same cause. Some have also found it inconceivable that Penkovsky could have committed so much to paper; but it is clear from the evidence of the book and of the trial that he was madly reckless, and his record of success shows him skilled at directing material in bulk to the correct address. As a whole, what is presented here has the stamp of genuineness. It includes a fine collection of photographs of passes to secret establishments (mentioned in the indictment) and some extracts from technical papers on espionage, and on preparations for nuclear and chemical warfare.

The reason why the Soviet authorities decided on a public trial was partly because Wynne was involved, but surely also as a warning, particularly to the Army. It is reasonable to assume that there must be others in Russia, even men in high places like Penkovsky, who are visited by the same dangerous thoughts. The emotions, and the rational arguments, which inspire people in the West to protest against the possibility of nuclear annihilation must touch some hearts in Russia too, even though they do not have the like liberty of expression. Penkovsky thought it his duty to act. If it is true, as is here asserted, that information which he supplied was in President Kennedy's mind when he determined his course in October, 1962, he did more than any member of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for the cause they profess. While they were demonstrating outside the American Embassy against the nuclear disarmament of Cuba, Penkovsky, by then in a prison cell in Moscow, had already made a decisive contribution to the successful disarmament of the island and the preservation of peace.